

**Sharon Ruston, *Creating Romanticism: Case Studies in the Literature, Science and Medicine of the 1790s*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 218. ISBN 9781137264282.**

**Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell, eds., *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2012. Pp. 304. ISBN 9780415890083.**

To review these two books together is to be reminded again of the constructed nature of 'Romanticism' (or 'Romanticisms'). Indeed, *Creating Romanticism*, the title of Sharon Ruston's book, could almost do parallel service as a title for *Legacies of Romanticism*, the essay-collection edited by Casaliggi and March-Russell. Ruston's book is an investigation of the scientific origins and connections of Romantic discourses and topics; while *Legacies of Romanticism* examines and interprets the reception and adaptation of Romanticism in the Victorian period and in the twentieth century. Both books are clear about the difficulty of using 'Romanticism' as a key term when it was not applied to an artistic movement until after the period to which it refers. Ruston is interested in Enlightenment thought, and she notes that it is hard to establish clear boundaries between the Enlightenment and 'Romanticism'. Casaliggi and March-Russell also refer to the anachronism of the term, and go on to recognise the multiplicity of Romantic phenomena and the consequent multiplicity of their 'legacies'. Indeed they also, rightly, ask how appropriate the word 'legacy' can be when the inheritors are re-shaping what they inherit.

Ruston's study of science and medicine in the 1790s revolves chiefly around their bearing on conceptions of life in general, of the organic, and of the human body and its interactions with the mind. Where it addresses discourses which might not be limited by this 'life-science' emphasis, it nevertheless cleaves to that emphasis. Thus the discussion of magnetism and electricity is focused on the controversy about animal magnetism, rather than on terrestrial magnetism. Despite her warning about the vagueness of the boundary between Enlightenment and 'Romantic', she does recognise historical shifts of emphasis. Thus Godwin's scepticism about animal magnetism is contrasted with Percy Shelley's interest in it, and the difference is seen as possibly indicating a change towards a characteristically Romantic emphasis on subjectivity and feeling (95). At the same time, she rightly continues to recognise the vagueness of the boundary as itself something to be encountered within Romantic works. In this connection, Wordsworth is seen as exemplary, and for this reason he provides an illustrative case in her Introduction. Wordsworth saw his innovative poetry of the 1790s as 'experimental', as well as therapeutic, in ways that were influenced by the idea of the 'physician'. But on the other hand, he also draws a distinction between the 'Poet' and the 'Man of Science'.

In subsequent chapters, Ruston examines the way in which Wollstonecraft understood science to provide evidence of the natural strength of women, and the natural affinity with each other of the different human 'races', while she noted the opportunity for 'improvement' or 'degeneration.' In her discussion of Godwin, Ruston spends some time on his distrust of animal magnetism, basing her account on his little-known translation of a sceptical report prepared by commissioners for the French crown. The French commissioners were influenced by a political interpretation of animal magnetism, whereby its deceptions were compared with the inflammatory suggestions of political demagogues. Godwin, by contrast, in the spirit of Paine on Burke, compared these deceptions to those practised by despots, a fact that leaves its mark on the depiction of Falkland in *Caleb Williams*. In a chapter on 'Romantic Creation' Ruston provides further evidence in the long story of 'organicism' and

also offers an illuminating account of the contemporary debate about monsters and monstrosity, drawing on the work of William Lawrence, which emphasises the difficulty of differentiating the monstrous from the normal. This idea leads into an original discussion of *Frankenstein*, a discussion which is also sceptical about the credence Mary Shelley gave to the idea of electrical or galvanic creation. Here we find a welcome qualification to received ideas. But Mary Shelley is anything but one-sided: one must be careful not to forget that she is undoubtedly working with ideas of misguided creation, and also toying with different views about what the vital principle might be. A final chapter looks at the work of Humphry Davy and expounds his sense of science and chemistry as 'sublime' in the way in which they offer insight into the transformations wrought by nature, as well as in the transformations of understanding which broaden the vision of the investigator.

Ruston's book offers a valuable addition to the long history of research into science in the Romantic era: its strength resides particularly in its grasp of the political sub-texts of the interpretation of scientific ideas in the period, as well as in the accounts of little-discussed texts, and in the importance it rightly accords to Davy. It apologises for recurring to what might seem like unfashionable topics, such as 'organicism' and 'creativity' (176). But the apology seems to me unnecessary, and based on a category-error: we may not do 'organicism', but many of the Romantics did.

The editors of *Legacies of Romanticism* had a challenging task, as the field it enters is already a crowded one, and they are in the position of marshalling a series of papers by experts on a range of subjects. Their brief introduction rehearses a few of the central topics: the problem of defining 'Romanticism'; its being anachronistic with respect to the period it relates to; its variousness; and the questionable nature of the concept of 'legacy.' On this last point I must declare an interest: the editors refer to my collection *Romanticism and Postmodernism* and suggest that Richard Cronin offers a 'corrective' to its views in the form of the argument that 'writers produce the writers who produce them' (3). One cannot argue with that; but in the introduction to my own collection I refer to the modern 'creation of a Romanticism which is fit to act as a precursor for Modernism'. There are other examples of carelessness. For instance, in their preamble to Part I, 'Early and Mid-Victorian', Casaliggi and March-Russell offer a summary of Richard Read's excellent essay on Hazlitt and Reynolds by stating that it proceeds 'to assess Reynolds's innovative style with the aim of seeing what it owed to Romantic poetry, British and Continental philosophy, and his own portraiture, and whether it set a reactionary or liberating precedent for later uses of ekphrasis' (12). Unfortunately, this should be Hazlitt, not Reynolds. The Introduction does offer one fresh emphasis in virtue of the prominence it gives to Andrew Bennett's *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*. This might look like confusion of thought (identifying a concern with posterity with an actual future), but there is a substantial point to be found in the 'inherent instability of a Romantic project that privileges future reception over current tastes and leaves unresolved contradictions in its wake' (5). The implication is that Romanticism is notably malleable. The editors state another claim to originality: namely, that they are unusual in placing the Victorian period and the twentieth century within one frame. The claim is untrue, but this would still be a potentially valuable exercise if it generated new insights in itself. Unfortunately, there is no overarching discussion which seeks to draw out the significance emerging from this wide view.

This does not mean that the individual contributions are damaged: quite to the contrary. Casaliggi herself purveys valuable detail on Keats and Ruskin; Porscha Fermanis offers support to a much-needed recognition of the influence of Romantic-period drama on the Victorian dramatic monologue; Catherine Maxwell is characteristically sharp on the importance of Shelley to Pater's thought; Ruth Robbins's reminder of the strength of the influence of Wordsworth's poetry and thought in the Nineties is shrewd and necessary.

Madeleine Callaghan's essay on Louis MacNeice is rightly aware of the continued sway of Romantic ideas in the work of writers who present themselves as anti-Romantic; and Stefania Ciocia emphasises the role of a Romantic-influenced imagination, rather than a concentration on technique and rationality, in the postmodern detective story.

The reception of canonical Romantic writers in the former colonies is a topic of great importance, and Daniel Sanjiv-Roberts and Ellen Dengel-Janic are aware of the telling ambiguity of the inheritance. Simon Swift offers a smart deconstruction of the deconstructionists' diagnosis of melancholy in Romantic and Romantic-influenced texts by finding their own work to be characterised by a form of post-Romantic melancholy. Joseph Tabbi finds a transformation of Romantic rhetoric in the perpetual present of new media. The collection has much of value to the worker in this field, but does not offer a coherent contribution to the larger debate.

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